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Drawing

by ALFRED M. BROOKS

(The substance of a lecture given at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, January 4, 1920.)

IT is my purpose to say a few elemental things about the art of drawing, and to offer concrete illustration of these things. My hope is that what I say, my suggestions, will be put into practice. By practice I mean thinking of these suggestions, that is, applying them while reading the daily papers or turning the pages of illustrated magazines and books.

My subject then is drawing, a fundamental and wonderful art and, verily, what Leonardo da Vinci called it, "father of all the arts." Drawing means that which is left behind when an instrument, pen or pencil, is dragged over a sheet of paper. That *something* is a line. What we think of when we speak of a drawing, in the sense of a picture, is a picture made up of such lines. In other words the sum of all the lines, a newspaper cartoon or a crayon head by Rubens, the sum of all the lines, the picture, conveys to us a just comprehension of what has been drawn, that is, the subject. While I am well aware that arid definition such as this is far from illuminating, yet none the less do I hold with Voltaire that defining terms is a prime requisite to mutual understanding. Therein lies my excuse for this much of what is so dry.

The great Italian of them all, Leonardo da Vinci, described drawing as being what I have already said, "father of all the arts." About two thousand years before him the "master of those who know," Aristotle, declared that "youths should be taught to draw in order that their perceptions of beauty may be quickened." In the latter half of the nineteenth century that scientist who was truly an educator, Thomas Huxley, said: "Everybody, or almost everybody, can learn to write and writing is a kind of drawing. I would require all to

draw." Here is the testimony of the ancient philosopher, the Renaissance artist, and the modern scientist *par excellence*, in respect to the value of drawing. There are, doubtless, those who will say that such evidence is uncalled for. Surrounded, as we are, by the witnesses to poor drawing on every hand, and knowing, as all must who have given the matter any careful consideration, how few there are who take an interest in drawing as such, or in its products, works of the highest art, old and modern—surrounded thus I must differ, as far as differing can go, with all who hold that such evidence is uncalled for.

Drawing, when good, is truth-telling in lines as writing is in words. Conversely, bad drawing is lying by means of lines, a fact lamentably patent in things as widely divergent as portraits of men and diagrams for accompanying deeds. The point, permit me to repeat, is this: drawing means to picture forth ideas by means of lines. This leads to a further consideration, a subject universally recognized yet rarely thought about. Intelligent people always distinguish between matter and that which is the opposite of matter. For lack of a better term I say spirit. Now an artist must be, before all else, an intelligent man. His first concern is with matter. He represents what he sees before his eyes. His second, but not less important, concern is spirit, which, to all intents and purposes, is that which makes matter alive. In other words, every real artist, by means of lines, compels us to recognize what he has drawn, a face, for example, and then he makes us understand something of the life behind the face, that is, the spirit of his subject. To put it differently, every great artist draws something of what he sees, and something of what he thinks about what he sees. Or, putting it still differently, every great artist gives us a portrayal of matter-of-fact and, in that portrayal, a gloss or an explanation of his reaction to matter-of-fact. This was never more clearly recognized than by Tennyson when he wrote:

“As when a painter poring on a face,
Divinely through all hindrance finds the man
Behind it, and so paints him.”

For example, Froude, speaking of Raphael's portrait of Pope Julius II., describes it aptly as the picture of that old man in the red velvet cape who looks like a "slumbering volcano." Raphael drew recognizably the shape of Julius' head, of his beard, of his eyes, of his shoulders, of the chair in which he sat. These are all matters-of-fact. Raphael then did something more. That something more was the imbuing of these matters-of-fact with the personality or spirit of Julius—spirit made evident in his own description of himself: "I am a soldier not a scholar; put a sword into my hand not a book." This personality, spirit, the something more, is just what Froude means when he speaks of Julius as looking like a "slumbering volcano." To make use of Tennyson's words, Raphael, through all hindrance, found the man, Julius, and so painted him. It might be added that as drawing means what is left, the marks or lines, when an instrument, a pencil, is dragged across the surface of paper, so painting means what is left when an instrument, a brush, is dragged across the surface of canvas. This is only an analogy, but an analogy in which, when you have made allowance for all differences between the ordinary conceptions of drawing and painting, based on differences of media there remains much of useful truth.

Turn now to a different angle of the subject by way of illustrating the selfsame fact. Leonardo da Vinci made drawings in black line upon white paper (what is ordinarily thought of as a drawing) of that common, pretty plant called star-of-Bethlehem. His drawing portrays the facts about the plant so clearly that no one who has ever seen the plant can fail to know of what the drawing is, and one who has never seen the plant will learn so much from the drawing that when, for the first time, he comes upon the plant he may recognize it at once. After looking carefully at Leonardo's star-of-Bethlehem, open your botany and look at the scientific botanical illustration of this same star-of-Bethlehem. In it you have the right number of petals, the true branching of the stems, exact statements concerning stamens—matters-of-fact, all, and

all important in the portrayal of truth. But what is the difference between Leonardo's drawing, a thing beyond value, and that of the botany? Mind, I am not speaking disrespectfully of the drawing in the botany. I am merely calling attention to a difference between Leonardo's and the other and asking in what the difference consists. Here is the answer: in one case, the botany, matter-of-fact, scientific accuracy to physical fact; in the other case, Leonardo's, the significant beauty, spirit of beauty which *through* the matter-of-fact made appeal to one of the greatest minds of all the ages. This significant beauty he portrayed by drawing that which contained it as body contains soul. To put it differently, by means of the likeness of what he saw, he has given us a true and therefore lovely portrait of what stirred his admiration.

Compare, in the same way, a botanical drawing of oak boughs and leaves with a crayon drawing of oak by John La Farge. In the former what is lacking which characterizes oak, which is primarily significant of oak, to all men? The expression of strength is absent. "Strong as oak" has passed into a proverb. Strength means the spirit, the very soul, of oak. What does La Farge's drawing tell us over and above the shape of the oak leaves and the growth of the oak boughs? It tells us, speaks to us, of strength. La Farge has reported matters-of-fact but he has made them the vehicle for conveying to our minds the universal, the "super-fact," if I may be allowed such expression, the "super-fact" of the strength of oak. In other words, La Farge has drawn the body of a specific oak and given to that body the soul of all oak. He has done what Leonardo did with the star-of-Bethlehem, the spirit of which plant, if you insist upon a term, may be called grace. And he has done what Raphael did with Julius II., whose spirit, if you again insist upon a term, was power. And this is the way of all great drawing and all great artists.

All great drawing implies a state of mind on the part of the artist. This state of mind is induced by the artist's grasp upon the spirit, the soul, of his subject, and grows out of his unique capacity for look-

ing into, as well as at, his subject, coupled with his ability to portray what he sees, understands, within, as well as what he beholds without. This is what no purely scientific drawing can do, or seeks to do. It is what no photograph can do because the photograph gives only what is before the camera. It does not look within. It is a machine. It cannot think and it cannot feel. It cannot interpret for it has no power of sympathy in it. It is the recorder of fact, but fact uninformed by spirit. In a word, it is not human. On the other hand, the mind of man can think and feel and can be thrown into "a state," that is, can become inspired. The true artist, the great draughtsman, Holbein, gives us the fact and gives us the state of mind into which the fact has thrown him, the picture of his inspiration; Raphael, the result of his understanding of the temper of a man like Julius II.; Leonardo, his understanding of the grace of a clump of star-of-Bethlehem over and above all facts such as the forms of petals and shapes of stamens; John La Farge, his appreciation of the spirit of oak, of the spirit of strength, lying behind the outward appearance, behind the forms of detail inherent in oak leaves and oak boughs as such.

What have we but foreboding in such a drawing as Rembrandt's *The Trees*, storm-swept as they are by the wind which heralds the rain, not yet falling on them, but drawing near, and soon to fall on them? Or what in such a drawing as Rembrandt's *Unfaithful Servant*? One figure stands tall, commanding, angry; the other cowers. There are but very few and seemingly rough lines, yet lines which tell us facts, nay, more than facts, as to the positions and figures of master and servant—tell us of the spirit of each of them upon the momentous occasion which inspired the artist to make this record, the little drawing which the world prizes so highly. Again, what of such a drawing as William Blake's *Paolo and Francesca*, the twain swept through all eternity by the unceasing winds of passion, the essence of unending weariness? But no man can *really* draw the wind or the light! Yet Blake drew the former and Dürer the latter, not once, but many times.

What did they do? This brings us to the matter of line as an artistic convention.

It is a fact that in nature we find no such thing as line in the sense in which I have already defined it, and in which line is commonly understood. We see objects—heads, for instance—leaving off and backgrounds beginning. If we hold a lily against a background of leaves or against a background of dark paper, what we see is the shape of the lily. When we cease to see the lily, we see the leaves or the paper. The flower is not defined by lines, but man, in order to convey an impression of the shape of the flower and to tell us what are its bounding limits and where the background begins, has, time out of mind, made use of the convention of line, that is, he draws the shape of the lily with line, with something we do not see in nature because it does not exist there. This is a convention, but it is a convention which can convey much of fact and much of significance and, in the hands of an artist, be the means of recording consummate beauty in the guise of truth.

I said that it was impossible to draw the wind or light, and I spoke of Blake's drawing of Paolo and Francesca. In it we see the lovers swept through space by the wind. Like nothing in nature, it is, however, perfectly plain in its explanatory clearness of the fact of wind. Or look at Dürer's drawing of Melancholy. Above the sea out of which the sun is rising, in the background of the drawing, there are great numbers of black lines spreading out over the sky like the sticks of a fan. They are pure convention, every one of them, resembling nothing in nature yet compelling everybody to think of the light rays of the risen sun. Again in Holbein's drawing of The Vision of Ezekiel we behold the four winds represented as puffy-cheeked faces in the sky. From the mouths of these four faces with puffy cheeks come straight lines down upon the sea. They are the wind and they stir it up as, in reality, the wind does stir it up. There is nothing like nature here, rather, a pure convention, but what all men accept as suggestively representative and highly explanatory and great considered as pure design.

Lines, like words, are conventions and to be good must be significant. This is clearly put by Locke in his *Essay on The Human Understanding* when he says: "The first and most palpable abuse is the using of words without clearly defined ideas; or, which is worse, signs without anything signified." In place of the words *signs* put the word *lines* and we have a most exact statement. There is nothing worse in drawing than the setting down of a single line which has not significance, just as there is nothing worse in writing than the putting down of a single word which has not significance. And the one thing which we may learn from the study of such drawings as Leonardo's, Holbein's, Dürer's, Raphael's, and La Farge's is that these men regarded every touch as precious because every touch had significance. The sum of truth which their drawings express concerning fact and concerning spirit depends upon the utmost significance being put into every line. Because of the dominant significance put by such men into every line and the resulting dominant significance of their drawings as designs, pictures, wholes, does their work take and hold its place as being, after its kind, transcendent.

There are a few easily distinguishable qualities common to all good lines: first, an even thickness throughout their length; second, a smooth, onward-flowing character, or a crumbly character. Permit me to call your attention to the reason why even thickness in line is, as a rule, a great virtue. I have already said we find no such thing as line in nature; that which we call a line and make so much use of, and by which so much truth and beauty are producible and preservable is a convention. Where one object leaves off another object, the background, begins. Now it stands to reason that if we are to find a satisfactory convention or symbol for this leaving off and this beginning we must have something which is homogeneous throughout its entire length. So when I decide to make a black line of measurable thickness (my symbol) represent upon a piece of white paper the bounding edge of the petals of a white lily and by means of this black line to

separate the body of the lily from the background against which I see it, that line which is of the same thickness throughout its length, therefore homogeneous, does in a measure keep faith to the condition of no line at all (the fact). If our line grows thick and thin it is an untrue symbol of a condition which does not change, that is, of petals leaving off and the background beginning. But if our line is of even thickness throughout its length it is a true symbol of that condition. I am well aware that there are those who will call this hair-splitting but the adage about calling a tail holds true none the less, and it is not hair-splitting. The smooth, onward-flowing line, the line without breaks, is the line which a man must be able to draw if he is going to represent correctly the bounding lines of human faces, of human bodies, or of the bodies of animals. On the other hand, the crumbly or broken line is the line which he must have at his command if he is going to draw the outlines of the trunks of oak and elm trees, or the features of ancient walls and towers, or the contours of mountains and precipices. There are other qualities characteristic of good line but my purpose is to make plain the fact that such qualities exist rather than to undertake an enumeration of them.

All really good onward-flowing lines are more or less flattened curves joined together. It is very rare that the arc of a circle will give us satisfactory results and never, when the subject which is being drawn is one which is remarkable for its strength, grandeur, or beauty as, for example, a fine female figure, a Venus, or such consummate types as those of Michelangelo on the Sistine vault. A striking characteristic of all the best drawings, without regard to actual dimensions, is the impression of size which they make upon the mind, their savoring of grandeur. Look at a drawing six inches high by Michelangelo or Dürer, and turn from it to one of the colossi of the Sistine vault. They impress us alike with the sense of magnitude. What gives it? The fact that all the curves which bound the figures are flattened curves and that each one tracks the eye, as it were, out into space on a great

line gives the sum of the whole the effect of a drawing every line of which carries the eye, that is, the mind behind it, off into considerations of bigness, whereas the arcs of circles, which lead the eye to complete every arc into its own circle, produce the sense of limitation, which, in the sum total, must produce a sense of smallness. Again, it is the flattened curve with the sharp bend at the end which in nature always speaks of what is strong. For example, the tendril of the grape-vine is a flattened curve throughout the greater part of its length but bends sharply where it takes hold of its support. The flanks of a strong horse are bounded by curved lines which are flattened, and by surfaces which are flattened, and not by full-sweeping curves, arcs of circles, and bulging surfaces, synonyms all for what is flabby and what is weak. No drawing was ever finer than that of the horses on the Parthenon frieze. Those small figures, small only in actual dimensions, always give the impression of grandeur and strength due, in large measure, to the reasons just explained. In other words, the arcs of circles single-track the eye and make for what is smug and "tight" and "hard" in a drawing as a whole, whereas the flattened curves do not single-track the eye but constantly carry it in directions and ways to produce the sense of freedom. This sense of restrained freedom gives the drawing its power of impressing the beholder with ideas of size and bestows sublimity upon it.

All this depends, of course, upon that of which we hear so much, technique. By technique is meant the actual workmanship, the doing as distinguished from the ideas expressed. I do not wish to be understood as saying that it is possible to separate the doing from the thing done. That is as impossible as it is to separate spirit from matter and leave what is valuable. But for working purposes there is such a thing as technique, the mere doing, *apart* from the idea. It is an essential means, but not an end, analogous to grammar, which is a means to human expression, through the medium of words, but not an end for which men care *per se*. Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair*, says something

which is much to the point about technique: "To use a cue at billiards well is like using a pencil,—you cannot master it at first and it is only by repeated study and perseverance joined to a natural taste that a man can excel in handling either." To excel in handling your tool; if it be a pencil, to make the marks light or dark, of even thickness throughout their length, onward-flowing, or crumbly, as you wish, and when you wish—all these and more—to the intended end of conveying a significance which you wish to convey, and to telling truthfully the matters-of-fact which you wish to report: that is technique.

Good drawing implies cleaving to the essential spirit of your subject; and never forgetting the meaning which lies behind the appearance, the significance of the thing or person which you are portraying. It means giving to this essential spirit an adequate body made up of lines—adequate being understood to mean truthful, or beautiful, or both. Good drawing implies ruthlessly foregoing every adventitious detail, no matter how interesting and lovely in itself, if such detail does not bear directly upon the intellectual concept of the matter in hand, that is, the artist's drawing of his subject. Michelangelo, for example, could have covered the ground in his *God Creating Adam* with pretty plants and entertaining animals, or could have filled the air with birds, but he did nothing of the sort. He gave us Adam, the figure of God, bare earth, and empty heavens, and he produced the thing which is sublime. Blake in his drawings for the *Book of Job* did the same thing. Recall that drawing which accompanies the text "Then went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord." It is entire, epic, consummate, beautiful in the statement of fact, yet almost bleak in its absolute disregard of everything which might have been but which would detract from the conceptual focus of the great verse.

Good drawing means "crystalline thought" made evident in lines, to use the perfectly descriptive words of Shelley's. It means putting down lines in a way never confused, no matter how complex. It means an

arrangement of lines which is always simple, in the sense of single, that is, direct. It means the telling of truth with affection. It means, so to speak, the outpouring of the artist's first and most immediate thought about his subject according to the way in which the subject has filled him with inspiration, from the tip of his pencil or pen. It means what Walter Pater meant when he wrote that the "artist is often out of humor with himself because he cannot project into a picture the life and spirit of his first thought with the crayon." These are among the chief things which constitute the value of great drawings. In such we come into immediate contact with the artist's first thought and his first fire of enthusiasm to record it, and it is this which a man like Birge Harrison understood and expressed adequately when he wrote: "The great draughtsmen of the world can be counted on one hand. Of these, probably Leonardo da Vinci and Holbein were the most eminent examples. In these two men the sense of refined and tender line is so exquisite that we should almost prefer to have it without color." This from a man, a painter, with passion for color, from a living, modern fellow-countryman who is one in his comprehension of the supreme value of drawing with Aristotle, Leonardo, and Huxley!